

16

A REVIEW ON "HUNTER AND SHELLEY ON HABIT AND UNCONSCIOUS MEMORY."

By SAMUEL WILKS, M.D., F.R.S.

In the exceedingly interesting life of Shelley by Professor Dowden (which no doubt some of your members will review in its psychological aspect) there is a remarkable passage showing how philosophers of the Shelley stamp had a firm belief in the hereditary transmission of human faculties—that a child was in possession of powers held by its forefathers, and that it wanted but a little stimulus to bring them out. In his own wild and fantastic way, when a mere boy at Oxford, he gave a remarkable exposition of his belief. Although having a mind as opposite as possibly could be to that of the scientist, it is remarkable to see how the same ideas as his are now current and promulgated by the natural philosopher and physiologist. And although the baby (as will be seen in the narrative) would not relate, as Shelley hoped, its past experience, yet it is this very experience used unconsciously, according to modern notions, which prompts the young animal to certain actions which have hitherto been vaguely styled instinctive. Thus Mr. Butler, in his "Life and Habit," refers the picking up of seed by the chick, and its running away from the fox when but just out of its shell, to the remembrance of like acts on the part of its parents. German writers have familiarized us with these ideas, and it may be remembered that Dr. Creighton has written an interesting and important work in which he carries the doctrine into the domain of pathology under the title of "Unconscious Memory in Disease." He shows how the protracted nature of a morbid state may continue long after the cause producing it has ceased to act, and how the only way to cut short the disease is by the use of some powerful agency which will arrest the habit. In this way he sees an explanation of the treatment by alteratives.

It is interesting to observe in reference to this subject how our great master, Hunter, had views which led him a long way towards these more modern doctrines. Unfortunately Hunter's style is so involved, and his lectures such un-

pleasant reading, that his words of wisdom have not always impressed us as they should. In his lectures on the "Principles of Surgery" it will be seen with what penetration and judgment he grasped the idea of the influence of custom and habit on the functions of the human body, and how he saw that the habit would remain long after the causes which had produced it had ceased to act.

It seems strange to place together two such opposites as Hunter and Shelley, and yet both of them were looking in the same direction from different points of view. The one had cautiously, and by close observation, seen the unconscious working of many actions of the human being in response to stimuli which had long ceased to be in operation; the other saw the same thing transmitted through many individuals. The two ideas are allied, and constitute a modern doctrine now taught in our schools.

First of Hunter on Habit or Custom. "Memory, or recollections of past impressions, has, I believe, been principally applied to, or supposed to be, an attribute of the mind only, but we know that every part endued with life is susceptible of impressions, and also that they are capable of running into the same action without the immediate impressions being repeated. Habits arise from this principle of repetition of, or becoming accustomed to, any impression, and the same thing exactly takes place in the mind. The memory of the body is of much shorter duration than that of the mind. The mind not only goes more readily into action the second time of an impression, though a considerable distance of time has taken place since it went into the same action before, but seems to take up the action with more ease, from nearly collateral causes, from a recollection of the similarity, or often without any possible recollection whatever, as if the actions in consequence of the former impression were taking place in the brain again.

Custom is with me the negative of habit. By custom comes an insensibility to impression, the impression diminishing although the cause is the same, and the parts becoming more and more at rest; whereas from habit there comes an increased facility to go into action, and also an acquired perfection in the action itself, the impression continuing the same, although the cause is diminishing.

Habit is the continuance of actions we have been accustomed to produce without any immediate assistance, or even continuance, of the first cause, as a body set in motion

continues to move after the cause of motion has ceased to act.

A habit of acting arises from a repetition of acting, which repetition of acting is custom, and which becomes the cause of the continuance of the same action; so that custom is always prior to habit, or, as it were, forms habit, which may be ranked as one of the secondary principles in the machine.

The first action being produced by a disposition in, or force upon, the part, this being repeated or continued a sufficient length of time, the action at length goes on, when that original disposition or force is gone, until some other power counteracts it or it wears itself out. This principle in the animal is similar to the old *inertiæ* in matter, for by it a motion began is continued, and their remaining at rest is from the same cause. This principle becomes the cause of the actions of the mind; it does not allow men to think differently from what they have been accustomed to think. Men in general go through life with the same modes of thinking, and thus it becomes a cause either of the retardation or improvement of the understanding. It retards improvement because it gets the better of even present sensations, and does not allow men to wander into novelty. It promotes improvement because it makes men perfect in what they have been long employed about."

Now of Shelley. "In a whimsical way he would apply the Platonic doctrine that all knowledge is reminiscence, so as to justify an interest in babyhood, which is not a usual characteristic of undergraduate philosophers. Strolling one day in the neighbourhood of Oxford he stood still to watch a bare-legged, bare-headed gipsy girl of six years old at her play of collecting snail shells, and was struck by the intelligence of her wild and swarthy countenance, and the glance of her fierce black eyes. "What an unworthy occupation (snail shell gathering) for a person who once knew perfectly the whole circle of the sciences!" At this moment a ragged boy—guardian of his sister—emerged above the roadside bank, and brother and sister presently disappeared. Shelley was charmed with the intelligence and marvellous wildness of the pair. "He talked much about them, and compared them to birds, and to the two wild leverets which that wild mother, the hare, produces. By and by the wild things came to view again, the boy bearing a bundle of sticks, unlawfully gathered, and dreading a rebuke or a blow. Shelley's

demeanour soon showed that he had nothing to fear. He laid a hand on the round, matted, knotted, bare and black head of each, viewing their moving mercurial countenances with renewed pleasure and admiration, and, shaking his long locks, suddenly strode away. 'That little ragged fellow knows as much as the wisest philosopher,' he cried, 'but he will not communicate any portion of his knowledge. It is not from churliness, however, for of that his nature is plainly incapable, but the sophisticated urchin will persist in thinking he has forgotten all that he knows so well. I was about to ask him to communicate some of the doctrines Plato unfolds in his "Dialogues," but I felt that it would do no good. The rogue would have laughed at me, and so would his little sister.'"

"One morning," writes Hogg, "we had been reading Plato together so diligently that the usual hour of exercise passed away unperceived. We sallied forth hastily to take the air for half an hour before dinner. In the middle of Magdalen Bridge we met a woman with a child in her arms. Shelley was more attentive at that instant to our conduct in a life that was past or to come than to a decorous regulation of the present, and with abrupt dexterity caught hold of the child. The mother, who might well fear that it was about to be thrown over the parapet of the bridge into the sedgy waters below, held it fast by its long train. 'Will your baby tell us anything about pre-existence, madam?' he asked, in a piercing voice and with a wistful look. 'He cannot speak, sir,' said the mother, seriously. 'Worse and worse,' cried Shelley, with an air of deep disappointment, shaking his long hair most pathetically about his young face; 'but surely the babe can speak if he will, for he is only a few weeks old. He may fancy, perhaps, that he cannot, but it is only a silly whim. He cannot have forgotten entirely the use of speech in so short a time; the thing is absolutely impossible.' The mother declared that she had never heard him speak, nor any child of his age. Shelley sighed deeply as he walked on. 'How provokingly close are those new-born babes,' he ejaculated; 'but it is not the less certain, notwithstanding the cunning attempts to conceal the truth, that all knowledge is reminiscence. The doctrine is far more ancient than the times of Plato, and as old as the venerable allegory that the Muses are the daughters of Memory; not one of the nine was ever said to be the child of Invention.'"